Oil, Gas Influence on CO Politics Questioned

KRISTEN WYATT, Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — The oil and gas industry in Colorado exerts an outsize influence on state politics, and its generous political spending might be the reason, suggests a report out Thursday from a left-leaning watchdog group.

Colorado Ethics Watch reviewed state lobbying disclosures and political donations from oil and gas companies, industry associations and their employees.

The group concluded the industry spent nearly $5 million lobbying Colorado officials between 2007 and 2012. That's more than twice what other mining businesses spent, and more than five times what the agriculture industry spent over the same period.

The companies and their employees also were generous campaign donors, dishing out more than $800,000 to 113 Republican and 82 Democratic candidates.

Ethics Watch does not accuse the oil and gas industry of wrongdoing. But the group suggests the industry benefits from spending so freely to influence politicians.

"The oil and gas industry punches above its weight when it comes to influence on Colorado politics," the report argues.

Ethics Watch notes that the oil and gas industry still spends much less on lobbying and politics in Colorado than the health care industry, which dwarfed lobbyist spending by all other industries during the period in question at nearly $17 million.

The watchdog group does suggest, though, that political spending by the oil and gas industry helps explain why state drilling regulations are so difficult for policymakers to tighten.

The legislative session that concluded earlier this month featured several big wins by the industry, including the defeat of a bill to impose new conflict-of-interest restrictions on oil and gas regulators. Lawmakers also declined to hike drilling fines that haven't changed since the 1950s. The oil and gas industry also helped block measures to increase drill inspections and water-testing requirements in northern Colorado.

"We knew that there would be a lot of money spent on oil and gas, but they took it up a notch this session, and I think it had an effect," said Sen. Matt Jones, D-Louisville, sponsor of some of the failed oil and gas measures.

The largest oil and gas lobbying spenders in recent years were two Texas companies, Pioneer Natural Resources and Noble Energy Inc. The companies did not immediately return calls and emails for comment Thursday. The Colorado Oil and

Gas Association, an industry group also mentioned in the report, was reviewing it and didn't have an immediate response.

The head of Colorado Ethics Watch, Luis Toro, said the report is designed to raise public awareness, not castigate legal lobbying and political activity.

"It's really a smart business move. Companies do not spend money on things unless it benefits shareholders," Toro said. "But when people think that their vote counts less than the influence of lobbyists, that's bad for democracy."

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Kristen Wyatt can be reached at http://www.twitter.com/APkristenwyatt [1]

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